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Angry Carter Said to Have Asked Aides to Swear They Kept Secrets

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WASHINGTON, July 16 — President Carter, angered over disclosures to the press about Administration foreign policy deliberations, authorized investigators earlier this year to obtain signed affidavits from Cabinet members and other senior officials affirming that they were not responsible for the disclosures, according to officials close to the case.

It was the first time, the officials said, that a President had sought sworn statements of innocence from his most senior aides as part of an investigation into unauthorized disclosures of secret national security information.

Those who signed statements, according to the officials, included Cyrus R. Vance, then Secretary of State; Adm. Stansfield Turner, Director of Central Intelligence; Zbigniew Brzezinski, the national security adviser, and Deputy Secretary of Defense W. Graham Claytor.

25 Inquiries This Year

Justice Department officials said today that the investigation was one of 15 current criminal inquiries into publication of secret military or diplomatic information. Ten other such investigations were closed in the last year, according to Robert L. Keuch, deputy assistant attorney general in the criminal division.

One of these was concluded with the withdrawal of some security clearances, the dismissal of one official, and several voluntary resignations, officials said. Sources said the case had dealt with a State Department problem.

Officials said that two of the 25 investigations had been ordered by the President. They refused to disclose how many others had been initiated at the request of the White House.

Investigations of unauthorized disclosures are conducted under provisions of the Espionage Act, which forbids the dissemination of classified information.

The inquiry that led to the request for affidavits stemmed from an account in The Washington Post last October that reported on divisions within the Administration over supplying military equipment to Morocco.

Several dozen officials who attended a

Cabinet-level meeting about Morocco last Oct. 16, or who received working papers on the issue, were asked to sign affidavits. The request reportedly infuriated some of the officials, according to aides.

The only official to refuse the request was Hodding Carter 3d, who resigned recently as State Department spokesman. "It was like being told that you weren't trusted," he said in an interview today. "I said, 'If you don't trust me, fire me, but don't ask me to sign some kind of paper saying I'm a good guy.'"

Officials said that Steven Cohen, a former Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Human Rights, agreed to sign a statement on the condition that it include his reservations about the use of sworn affidavits.

Other senior officials, sources said, signed prepared statements stating that they had not been responsible for disclosures to the Washington Post reporter, William Branigin.

Circulated by Lawyer

In the State Department, the prepared statement was circulated late this spring by William J. Lake, a lawyer in the Office of Legal Adviser. Middle-level officials approached by Mr. Lake said he told them that statements had been signed by Mr. Vance, Deputy Secretary Warren M. Christopher, and David D. Newsome, Under Secretary for Political Affairs.

The investigation into the disclosures began shortly after the Post report was published, according to officials. It began with a routine inquiry by the Federal Bureau of Investigation, which conducts interviews in such cases at the request of the Justice Department.

Agents questioned several dozen senior Administration officials, officials said, working from a list supplied by the White House. The list included officials who had attended the meeting of the Cabinet-level Policy Review Committee on Morocco.

The White House counsel, Lloyd N. Cutler, was consulted from time to time on the investigation, White House aides said. When it became clear that the inquiry would probably not lead to any prosecutions, Mr. Cutler apparently took under consideration the question of asking for sworn statements.

Mr. Cutler would not comment today on his involvement in the investigation, but sources close to the case said that he eventually recommended asking for affidavits and that Mr. Carter approved.

Earlier, in June 1979, the White House started an investigation into a report in The New York Times about the use of an electronic listening post in Norway to help verify Soviet compliance with provisions of the strategic arms limitation treaty.

According to one account, Mr. Carter threatened to dismiss officials if unauthorized disclosures were found to be coming from their areas. This warning came after a CBS News report on Feb. 5, 1979, that American officials believed the Iranian Government head by Prime Minister Shahpur Bakhtiar would fall.

Ray Jenkins, a White House spokesman, said today that Mr. Carter had made no such threat but had made clear that he held officials responsible for disclosures coming from their departments.

Generally, Justice Department officials consider such investigations to be an ineffective use of manpower and money because they rarely result in prosecutions, or even the collection of solid evidence. "These investigations are a tool for intimidating people, not prosecuting them," one official said.

Still, according to veteran Washington officials, every President in memory has occasionally become alarmed by unauthorized disclosures of national security information and taken steps to stop them.

President Nixon was angered by press reports of secret United States military initiatives in Southeast Asia, including the disclosure of the secret bombing of Cambodia in 1969. In an attempt to determine the source of those disclosures, the White House authorized wiretapping of Administration officials and journalists.

The publication of the Pentagon Papers in 1971 fueled White House concern about national security leaks and led to the formation of the "plumbers" unit in the White House.

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